

BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY

Conducted by Alfred M. Bailey

"*Sac-a-plomb*" (sack of lead) is the name the natives of the marsh country of the Louisiana gulf coast give the Pied-billed Grebe. And he is well named. Who has not seen a "hell diver" swimming quietly along, his body as buoyant as a cork? Suddenly, as though pulled from below, the grebe sinks from sight, and fortunate indeed is the observer who again sees that particular grebe—if the diver desires to remain hidden.

I had long desired to photograph a grebe on its nest, and this spring I had a good opportunity for there were many pairs nesting on a little reed grown lake a few miles from my home at La Grange, Illinois. The lake is in a thickly settled community and is bordered by the Lincoln Highway, so there is a continuous procession of cars whirring by—and yet, so secretive are the marsh birds that I found several species nesting within from fifty to one hundred yards of the road. Among these birds might be listed the American and Least Bitterns, King, Sora, and Virginia Rails, Coots, and Pied-billed Grebes.

I worked this pond last year—it is scarcely three hundred yards in length by one hundred fifty, wide—but had never seen a grebe. I found several old nesting platforms which I felt sure must have been the homes of grebes, so this year I was early afield. The fore part of May I found eight nests with from six to nine eggs, in a short time and did not half cover the field. At this time, the vegetation was scant with the tules and cat-tails scarcely a foot in height, and as there was a great deal of open water, the nests were easily found. But the grebes were so shy that I failed to see a single bird on this trip, and my subsequent ones, except from blinds which I had erected near nests.

I chose a nest in shallow water which was surrounded by a low growth of cat-tails. The grebe had covered her eggs with moss and dead vegetation, as is characteristic of these divers. I watched carefully for an hour without seeing a grebe, and had about given up hope when a rasping, throaty call was given from a nearby stand of cat-tails. A few moments later, there was a slight ripple behind the nest, and I saw, in line with tules, the head and neck of the grebe. She appeared without a sound from beneath the surface, and remained absolutely motionless behind the vegetation for minutes, and then, convinced that all was well, she slid out of her place of concealment, and slowly swam toward the nest. She paused for a moment, her colors blending with the drab surroundings, and then, with little commotion, climbed upon the moundlike nest and started to remove the moss which concealed the eggs. She worked around the nest, keeping her beak in the center and her tail to the outside: a second time she circled before the eggs were cleared to her satisfaction. Then she settled upon them and eyed the blind continuously.

On subsequent trips, I added to my film until a good series was secured. On one occasion the bird showed reluctance in returning to her nest, and the whirring of the motion camera seemed to disturb her more than usual. The eggs were not well concealed, and the grebe would climb out on the nest, rearrange the moss with a few deft dabs of her beak, and quickly dive from sight. Finally, however, she climbed out—within six feet of the camera, removed the vegetation from the eggs, sat upon them, and then, when I scuffed the water, she very obligingly re-covered her eggs, and disappeared over the side of the nest.—A. M. B.



The Pied-billed Grebe approaching her nest, and—



Settled.